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# **Autonomy and Alienated Subjectivity: A re-reading of Castoriadis, through Žižek**

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## **Abstract**

In a time of political passivism in the Western democracies, this article argues for the value of Cornelius Castoriadis's radical theory of autonomy as a means of conceptualising (wo)man's ability to pro-actively create new social institutions *ex nihilo*. In making this argument, however, it also seeks to 'correct' a key flaw within the model of subjectivity underlying this theory of autonomy. Castoriadis's attempts to bypass the notion of alienation as a metaphysical given led him to an internally contradictory conception of subjectivity based around an originary monadic psyche. Through a critical re-reading of Castoriadis's position through that of Slavoj Žižek's 'transcendental materialist theory of subjectivity', this article shows how (re)inserting alienation into the former's work as a constitutive element of the autonomous subject makes it possible to overcome the aforementioned contradiction whilst maintaining a concept of radical autonomous social change that goes beyond Žižek's own rather inactive idea of 'the Act'.

**Keywords:** Autonomy; Alienation; Cornelius Castoriadis; Slavoj Žižek

Disagreements over the concept of autonomy are a key facet of debates over subjectivity. Their importance goes much further, however, in so far as autonomy is linked with the quality of society, of politics, and of democracy. All of these are seen as in decline in Europe in a historical period arguably characterised by a disengaged, 'anti-political' consensus (Democratic Audit, 2012). A means of understanding autonomy which links questions of subjectivity to radical, political activity is therefore vital.

This article asserts that such a means is offered by Cornelius Castoriadis, one of the foremost theorists of autonomy, his radical conceptualisation of which is based around a specific psychoanalytically derived model of subjectivity. In so doing it echoes the arguments already made by others such as Yannis Stavrakakis that Castoriadis's conceptualisation of subjectivity is internally flawed, but goes beyond such critiques to argue that this need not mean that his far-reaching vision of autonomy be abandoned on the basis that the key flaw can be corrected with only minor repercussions for the latter.

The solution outlined here is to retreat to an imagined position before Castoriadis's theoretical mis-step and continue forward again along a different path. This endeavour is made easier due to the remarkable similarities up until this imaginary point between the theory of subjectivity pronounced by Castoriadis and that of the individual whose divergent path is recommended instead – Slavoj Žižek. In moving forward, hand-holds are thus more easily sought for along the way than might otherwise be expected.

To summarise in opening, the problem within Castoriadis's perspective of subjectivity is his contradictory notion of the psyche as a pre-social matrix-of-meaning which acts as both a lost *and* continuing point of reference within the socialised subject. Castoriadis's adoption of this perspective arises in part from a rejection of the notion of alienation as a metaphysically given aspect of subjectivity, viewing it instead as derived from present

heteronomous social relations and as such to be overcome in his desired 'autonomous society'. Through an engagement with Žižek's theory of subjectivity this article, in contrast, argues for the reverse: autonomy of the kind Castoriadis desired, it seeks to show, necessitates embracing alienation as a fundamentally constitutive part of subjectivity. The end result is that, by re-reading Castoriadis's conceptualisations of the subject and autonomy through Žižek's own conceptions, this article overcomes the contradiction previously inherent to his conception of the subject whilst maintaining a concept of autonomous social change far greater than Žižek's own inactive interpretation of 'the Act'.

#### *Article Content and Structure*

A very respectable literature now exists discussing the works of both Castoriadis (Adams, 2011; Kioupkiolis, 2012; Klooger, 2009; Uribarri, 1992; Whitebook, 1998) and Žižek (Kay, 2003; Parker, 2004; Sharpe & Boucher, 2010; Sheehan, 2012; Vighi, 2010) with regards to the subject.<sup>1</sup> This article pays close attention to two authors in particular. Specifically, it follows in the wake of Yannis Stavrakakis's critique of Castoriadis in *The Lacanian Left* (2007) and Adrian Johnston's explication of Žižek's 'transcendental materialist theory of subjectivity' (2007). Naturally, these authors' works subsequently provide valuable points of reference with regards to both Castoriadis and Žižek's theories for those seeking further insight into the argument set out here. Nevertheless, rather than rely heavily upon the reader's own appraisal of these texts – as well as the primary literature – it is important that some time is still spent elucidating the core conceptual mechanics behind both thinker's respective positions.

This is due to the weight placed by each on theoretical consistency and ontological transparency. Castoriadis (2007, 185), for example, spoke angrily against ‘the collector’ and ‘the eclectic’, arguing that theorists ‘can’t elude the demand for coherence’ and ‘cannot establish articulations between ... different spheres just any which way – supposing they do lend themselves to articulations.’ In this same vein, in describing himself as ‘an extreme Stalinist philosopher’, Žižek explains that: ‘it’s clear where I stand. I don’t believe in combining things ... I believe in clear-cut positions.’ (quoted in Žižek and Daly, 2008, 45)

Recognition of such shared antipathy for ‘combing things’, alongside a ‘demand for coherence’ and ‘clear-cut positions’, brings with it a particular responsibility that there be absolutely clarity that there is no ‘eclecticism’ in the essential theoretical revisions proposed herein – that it is clear where the author stands. In taking the space to explicate Castoriadis and Žižek’s perspectives, the aim is to satisfy such concerns by ‘showing the workings’ underlying the article’s argument – following Žižek’s dictum that ‘the only way to be honest and to expose yourself to criticism is to state clearly and dogmatically where you are. You must take the risk and have a position’ (Žižek and Daly, *op cit.*).

With this in mind, the article’s argument is structured in four parts: First, it details Castoriadis’s theory of autonomy and the subject. Second, it identifies the key problem within this theory – specifically, the contradictions at the heart of the monadic psyche as pre-social foundation for autonomous creations. Third, in answer to this, it turns to the work of Žižek, setting out his own conceptualisations of the subject and indicating how it offers a means of overcoming the problem in Castoriadis’s work. Fourthly, it

demonstrates how such a solution provides a coherent conceptualisation of autonomous activity still greater than the Žižek-ian 'Act'.

### **i) Castoriadis: The Human Psyche and Creation**

#### *Self-Creation and 'the Autonomous Society'*

Understanding Castoriadis's conception of autonomy is helped *via* an understanding of his favoured social goal, 'the Autonomous Society'. Castoriadis (2007, 49) defines the autonomous society as one 'capable of explicitly, lucidly challenging its own institutions.' This he differentiates from a 'heteronomous society', wherein members think and act 'in ways imposed (overtly or subterraneously) by the institution or the social environment' (*ibid*, 86). Heteronomous individuals, he holds, 'only apparently use their own judgement, whereas in fact they apply social criteria when judging' (*ibid*, 75). In opposition to this '[a]n autonomous person is someone who gives herself her own laws', an act (*autos-nomos*) which is achieved, Castoriadis argues, through the activity of self-reflexion; the individual 'look[ing] inward, wondering about its motives, its reasons for acting, its profound inclinations' (*ibid*, 89).

This, Castoriadis (*ibid*) notes, is 'immensely difficult', however people have a capacity for autonomy in this manner because, though inseparable from the external institution, they retain the ability to take 'a reflexive, critical, deliberative' relation to this 'contents ... from outside' and thus '*can* to a significant degree say yes and no.' (Castoriadis, 1996, 12-3) It is this capacity which makes possible the institution<sup>2</sup> of an autonomous society: 'The self-reflexive activity of an autonomous society is essentially dependent on the self-reflexive activity of its members' (Castoriadis, 2007, 90), the former thus being 'a

society in which collective reflectiveness has reached its maximum' (Castoriadis, 1997, 194).

In this manner, Castoriadis places the power to enact radical change firmly within the hands of autonomous agents. Indeed, Castoriadis contends that this autonomous creative ability should 'be understood in the strongest sense possible', as being able to enact 'the emergence of forms which are in no sense or manner determined by what preceded them ... therefore involv[ing] the emergence/positing of the genuinely new' (Klooger, 2009, 5). Autonomous creation, for Castoriadis (2007, 73), 'is ontological creation: of forms such as language, institution qua institution, music, and painting; or of some specific form, some work of art, be it musical pictorial, poetic, or other'.

For Castoriadis, however, this capacity for self-reflexivity in regards to the 'outside' and thus autonomy is based upon a particular conception of the subject and subjectivity which, as detailed below, suffers from an internal contradiction. To appreciate the dangers this brings for Castoriadis's conception of autonomy – and subsequent explanation of an alternative – it is necessary to first understand this conception and contradiction.

### *Psychic Monad qua Radical Imagination*

Castoriadis starts from the argument that people can exist only within and through society, but that there are aspects in the individual human being which are 'not social' (Castoriadis, 2010, 45). These he identifies as, first, the 'biological substratum, the animal being' – i.e. the corporeal bodily *grund* from which come affective somatic needs – and second 'the psyche, that obscure, unfathomable, essentially *a*-social core' which is 'infinitely more important' than the biological substratum, though the latter is not non-

affective (Castoriadis, 2007, 184). In other words, for Castoriadis the social does not reach *all the way down* into the psyche, which ‘cannot be reduced to society, just as society cannot be reduced to the psyche’ (*ibid*; see also Adams, 2011, 86).

So conceived, the psyche, or ‘radical imagination’, is an unconscious ‘magma’ – molten, protean, shifting and unpredictable – which is also creative, being ‘the source of a perpetual flow of representations that are not prompted by ordinary logic’ (Castoriadis, 2010, 45). It is this ‘primal unconscious’ within which representations originate: ‘it is *Bildung* and *Einbildung* – formation and imagination – it is the radical imagination that makes a ‘first’ representation arise out of a nothingness of representation, that is to say, *out of nothing*’ (Castoriadis, 2005, 283). The psyche is thus itself ‘the capacity to produce an ‘initial’ representation – the capacity of putting into image or making an image’ (*ibid*, 282) – and as such provides the basis/capacity for creation *ex nihilo* fundamental to Castoriadis’s conception of the autonomous subject outlined above. But from where does this capacity, as an inherent property of the psyche, derive?

### *The Originary Monadic Psyche*

Castoriadis premises his conception of the radical psyche upon a psychical shift in the form of a break between an ‘originary being of psyche’ or ‘original monadic state’ belonging to the *infans* and a ‘developed’ subjectivity which follows resultantly from said break (Castoriadis, 2007, 154). The former original monadic state is a closed, ‘unitary’ totality (Castoriadis, 2005, 293). All meaning is experienced in an unmediated manner, it being ‘at one and the same time self, proto-subject and proto-world, as they mutually and fully overlap’ (*ibid*, 291).



The unavoidable, violent breaking of this original monadic state is explained by Castoriadis (2007, 155-7) through a basic Freudian metaphor: 'the absence of the breast', he writes, 'amounts to a destruction of the closed totality of the *infans*, whence the collapse of meaning of its world', leaving 'a gaping hole in its world'. Put simply, socialisation – in the form of the *infans*' necessary dependence upon others and the resultant presence of the Other in human form (in particular the family) – leads to the rupturing of the self-enclosed psychic monad.

The consequence of this evental episode is a subsequently wrought, divided subject, with the resultant development of 'the I' *qua* ego via the 'cathecting' of the existing societal institution as suture for the 'absence of meaning' which constitutes the aforementioned 'gaping hole' of lost-meaning. The development of the ego is thus essentially a social construct whereby, after the fracturing of the monadic psyche, socialisation 'leans on ... the psychical need for meaning' (*ibid*), specifically the impossible search for a return to the inaccessible, pre-socialised, pre-break monadic state of meaning with its 'absolute congruence between intention, representation and affect' (Castoriadis, 2005, 296).

#### *An 'original capacity' for creativity*

With regards to (wo)man's capacity for autonomous creativity, Castoriadis draws an important retroactive conclusion from the above by declaring that the possibility of such a destruction of this closed psychic totality and resultant formation of the ego is itself only a possibility if the monadic psyche constitutively amounts to 'the first matrix of meaning' (Castoriadis, 2005, 299) – i.e. an 'original capacity' which 'contains within itself the possibility of organizing all representations' – thereby containing a constitutive pre-social 'proto-meaning' that 'realizes by itself, just where meaning

cannot yet exist, total meaning...' (*ibid*, 299). This is due to the fact that, according to Castoriadis, such a 'memory of monadic memory' must exist to make socialisation (i.e. the cathecting of social-meaning) possible at all (Castoriadis, 1984a, 25). The capacity for self-alteration is thus a constitutive part of the psyche, with people's potential for autonomy – as the capacity to create *ex nihilo* – devolving from this entity.

As Whitebook (1998, 178) describes, Castoriadis thus finds himself committed 'to the monadic starting point as pre-social meaning, which he apparently feels he has to defend in a radical form in order to defend, in turn, the autonomy and creativity of the radical imagination.' This is because, as Yannis Stavrakakis (2007, 55) quoting Whitebook explains, this 'mode of originary being of the psyche' and resulting continuation of a 'first-pseudo meaning' provides a 'supplement' which acts as a pre-socially-derived a-social basis for reflection 'at a distance' post-socialisation – the necessary ability, as discussed, for Castoriadis's radical conception of autonomy *qua* self-creation. Thus, the 'ego of autonomy', as Castoriadis (2010, 42) describes it, 'is not the absolute Self', but 'the monad cleaning and polishing its external-internal surface in order to eliminate the impurities resulting from contact with others': In other words, no monad, no autonomy.

## **ii) The Problem: In Defence of Alienation**

Castoriadis's rationale for this particular a-social end-point has already been explained with regards to his theory of the subject. Yet a normative reasoning is also clearly present, tied to his embracing of autonomy as social value and aim: his desire to avoid acknowledging alienation as constitutive of subjectivity. This desire explains, in part, his visceral rejection of the writings of Jacques Lacan (see: Castoriadis, 1984b, 49). There

were, admittedly, a number of reasons for this rejection (*cf.* Dews, 2002), but a key element appears to be a problem with Lacan's 'basic move', in Žižek's words, 'to elevate psychoanalysis to the level of philosophy' such that 'apparently clinical categories ... are not just subjective pathologies' but rather 'disturbances in the basic ontological relationship between the subject and the world' (Žižek quoted in Hauser, 2009, 1).

In this sense, what Castoriadis arguably feared in Lacan was a theoretical fetishism of the 'the gap/lack' – the aforementioned 'absence of meaning' – such that 'alienation' is built into the very definition of the subject and social (Tormey and Townshend, 2006, 23). Castoriadis rejected this, viewing alienation instead as something to be overcome in the autonomous society: 'The revolutionary project', as he put it, is 'the historical aim of a society that would have gone beyond alienation', the latter being 'a social-historical fact (instituted heteronomy), not a metaphysical given' (Castoriadis, 1997, 29). Grounding the radical imagination upon the continuation of a pre-social meaning made it possible, so Castoriadis believed, that we could 'overcome the alienation of ourselves from the world' (Tormey and Townshend, 2006, 27). It was in this light that Lyotard (1993, 116), who broke with Castoriadis in 1964, wrote of his former comrade as being 'rightly bored with reassessing historical, dialectic and diarrhoetic materialism' but as nevertheless proposing 'to put in its place the abominable super-male thing of generalised creativity ... against alienation'.

What Castoriadis's feared within Lacan's model of subjectivity, was that his notion that the subject was born into language meant the latter preceded the former, alienating it, and thus determined (in the strong sense of the term) their shaping and creation. Žižek (2006, 8) caricatures this general interpretation as meaning that, from Castoriadis's 'simplified' perspective:

... for Lacan, we human individuals are mere epiphenomena, shadows with no real power of our own, that our self-perception as autonomous free agents is a kind of user's illusion blinding us to the fact that we are tools in the hands of the big Other [the symbolic order, society's unwritten constitution] that hides behind the screen and pulls the strings.

It was in defiance of such a perceived view that Castoriadis theorised the afore-given model of subjectivity – seeking to reconfigure the psyche so as to prevent the unconscious becoming ‘hostage to conservative forces’ (as he viewed it in Lacan) by remodelling it as ‘a source of radical energies as opposed to a source of inertia and social conservatism’ (Tormey & Townshend, 2006, 22). For him, the psyche was ‘radically different from language as representations appear neither distinct nor definite’ (Adams, 2011, 87).

As Stavrakakis (2007) details, however, the problem with this model of subjectivity is that it is based upon a crucial continuation between the two separated moments of the ‘inside’ – the subjective state of the *infans* and of the socialised subject – whereby, rather than these two states being incommensurable, the gap between them is to all extents and purposes annulled via a continuity of ‘meaning’. Although with the ‘break’ socialisation replaces the original monadic meaning with social meanings, ultimately *it cannot be eliminated* – it is never fully abandoned or repressed. As such it is based upon the contradictory and essentialist notion of the original monadic matrix-of-meaning as both a lost *and* continuing point of reference. Indeed, it must on principle be so if it is to function as a ‘meaning-prototype’ for such a socially distanced creative ability (*ibid*, 56).

It is understandable, therefore, that Tormey and Townshend (2006, 28) caution that ‘it is perhaps worth pausing ... to gauge the degree to which such an account represents an advance on those [e.g. Lacan’s] it seeks to displace’ as this appears, at first sight, a

fundamental flaw within Castoriadis's theory of subjectivity. Nevertheless, though faced with this serious contradiction, Castoriadis's work should not be rejected *in toto*, thereby surrendering not only his insights into subjectivity but, resultantly, his valuable conception of autonomy also. Instead, the fault within his theory – the monadic psyche in the form explicated above – can and should be fixed. Doing so, however, necessitates a retreat from Castoriadis's 'advance', to a purely imagined place situated before Castoriadis's stark rejection of Lacan – arguing that this schism was unnecessary in the first place – before subsequently starting forward again in a changed direction.

Stavrakakis (2007, 58-9) describes Castoriadis as 'obviously afraid that registering the irreducible force of alienation, antagonism and dislocation, can endanger the prospects of radical change – of imagining a better future – and discourage political participation', noting that 'Lacanian theory does not share this fear.' This 'fearless' position is broadly advocated here also. Castoriadis's antagonistic critique was entirely too negative, being mistaken in its construal of the Lacanian perspective as an ultimately closed and thus determined structuralist one. Or, more accurately, this is the case as regards the version of Lacan offered in what Adrian Johnston (2007) labels Slavoj Žižek's 'transcendental materialist' ontology of subjectivity.

This ontology lies at 'the very core' of Žižek's thinking (see Hauser, 2009, 2); as he himself has declared:

If you were to ask me at gunpoint ... to demand, "Three sentences. *What* are you really trying to do?" I would say, Screw ideology. Screw movie analysis. What really interests me is the following insight: if you look at the very core of psychoanalytic theory, of which even Freud was not aware, it's properly read *death drive* ... the only way to read this properly is to read it against the background of the notion of subjectivity as self-relating

negativity in German Idealism. That is to say, I take literally Lacan's indication that the subject of psychoanalysis is the Cartesian cogito – of course, I would add, as reread by Kant, Schelling, and Hegel. I am here very old fashioned. I still think basically this ... is philosophy, and all the rest is a footnote. (Žižek, 2003)

This theoretical project constitutes the homogenous core from which Žižek's heterogeneous style normally distracts (Eagleton, 2001, 40, 49). It is to this that attention is now directed in the belief that Žižek's theory of the subject opens a better route for advancement. This is because it offers an alternative, yet familial model of the psyche upon which to 'ground' Castoriadis's radical conceptualisation of autonomous creativity which does not suffer from the contradiction at the heart of his own theory. What this re-reading of Castoriadis via Žižek involves, however, is a rather violent theoretical act: the monad must be excised, leaving in its stead the very thing Castoriadis believed must be overcome if true autonomy was to be achieved – the recognition of alienation as a constitutive aspect of subjectivity. The following section explains how such a procedure is possible, an undertaking which, as was the case with Castoriadis, means first detailing Žižek's own Lacanian derived theory of subjectivity, *pace* the former's.

### **iii) Žižek: a 'Transcendental Materialist Subjectivity'**

#### *Cartesian Similarities and the 'Broken' Psyche*

With regards to subjectivity, Žižek and Castoriadis share many points in common, including a significant joint opposition to the intellectual trend to absorb the subject into the intersubjective; both maintain an attachment to the Cartesian *cogito* as concept. For Castoriadis, an essential moment of Cartesianism is preserved in the aforementioned unitary psychic monad. In *The Ticklish Subject* meanwhile, Žižek (2000,

1) sought to counteract the intellectual exorcists who sought to dissipate the 'spectre ... haunting western academia ... the spectre of the Cartesian subject'.

Being both based within psychoanalytical theory (see: Fricker, 2007, 38), a key similarity is further obvious in the foundational role each prescribes to an unavoidable psychic 'break' as the well-spring of developed, post-*infans* subjectivity. Johnston (2007, xxiii) – whose work is drawn upon extensively herein – describes in detail and with clarity how in Žižek's theorisation, 'transcendental, cogito-like subjectivity emerges' – indeed is propelled – 'ontogenetically' from 'an originally corporeal condition as its anterior ground'. As with Castoriadis's conception (see above), this material *grund*, rather than being internally harmonized, is from the very beginning 'hard-wired for a certain dysfunctionality', being 'shot through with various antagonisms, conflicts, and tensions' (*ibid*).

It is here where differences start to appear. In Castoriadis's conception the monadic psyche is a positive state separate from the social – somatic and social 'shocks' being mediated through an original, essentialist meaning which exists pre-socialisation. This perspective differs from Žižek's wherein the *infans* is in a pre-symbolic *real* state - 'both the real of the subject and the real he has to deal with as exterior' (Lacan, 1992, 118). The 'Real', in Lacan, is the unfathomable limit which cannot be objectified as it is that point in regards to which there is no 'meta-language' (Žižek, 1994,b 22); it 'is not an external thing that resists being caught in the symbolic network, but the fissure within the symbolic network itself' (Žižek, 2006, 72). As such this 'subject-in-the-real' contains no pre-social, positive 'meaning' to mediate somatic and social stimuli.

Back on shared ground, however, through the socio-symbolic intrusion of the 'Big Other'<sup>3</sup> (specifically family) a moment of 'imagining' is brought about whereby the

infant is guided to recognise itself in its own reflected image. In Lacanese, this is referred to as the 'Mirror-stage' (see: Žižek, 1998a, 271) and herein, through the embrace of the (symbolic) imago the enclosed intra-psychical imaginary is thrust/propelled into socio-symbolic subjectivity in a 'choice' *forced* – as per Castoriadis's conceptualisation with 'the absence of the breast' – by the 'ontogenetic catalyst' of the short-circuiting failure of the aforementioned volatile, primordial material *grund*. In this moment a 'crack' is brought about between the organism (corporeal) and its image (symbolic) which are thereon negatively related via a tensional opposition. Once again, it is a model based around a wrought, divided subject.

### *The Subject as Void*

*Contra* Castoriadis, however, for Žižek, the unconscious is not a monad, but this very 'crack', the void of radical negativity, of *nothingness* – a dynamic absence/lack 'forever irreducible to any and every instance of determinate phenomenal actualization' (Johnston, 2007, 12). Like an onion, peeling away the layers of the ego leads one not to a hardened core (e.g. a positive psychic monad) but to nothing – an 'empty spot' (*ibid*, 9). To quote Žižek (1994a, 144):

Lacan's point here is that an unsurmountable gap forever separates what I am "in the real" from the symbolic mandate that procures my social identity: the primordial ontological fact is the void, the abyss on account of which I am inaccessible to myself in my capacity as a real substance... Every symbolic identity I acquire is ultimately nothing but a supplementary feature whose function is to fill out this void. This pure void of subjectivity, this empty form of "transcendental apperception," has to be distinguished from the Cartesian *Cogito* which remains *res cogitans*, a little piece of substantial reality miraculously saved from the destructive force of universal doubt...



This leads to what Žižek (1990, 252-4) refers to as the 'barred-subject'<sup>3</sup> wherein self /ego/imaginary and subject/id/void are construed as opposing poles; this is a 'split subject' which 'can never fully 'become himself' ... can never fully realize himself' (Žižek, 1992, 181).

The transcendental ego (self) is the symbolic 'I' (the imago) filled by the imaginary fantasies to suture the void which – being an impediment to the attainment of placid, closed, unsullied self-consciousness – in a paradoxical logic, generates that which it impedes. This is because 'the repeated attempts by reflective activity to "catch its own tail" generate a by-product, namely, fantasies as responses to this irreducible self-opacity' (*ibid*, 32) and these supplementary fantasies 'filling out the void' constitute the ego. In this re-formulated regard, as Žižek (1993, 64) puts it: '*Cogito* designates this very point at which the "I" loses its support in the symbolic network ... and thus, in a sense which is far from metaphorical, ceases to exist' (Perhaps, the phrase might be reworked then to read "I cannot think it, therefore I am"). Subjectivity is thus a symptom of this unconscious psyche *qua* void, being ultimately 'the permanent tension between the phenomenal, experientially constituted ego and the quasi-noumenal, unrepresentable *manque-à-être* (lack-of-being) in relation to which every determinate identity-construct is a defensive, fantasmatic response.' (Johnston, 2007, 9)

#### *Same Same, but Different: misreading Castoriadis through Žižek*

Explicated in this manner, the similarities between Castoriadis and Žižek's theories of subjectivity are easy to see. Both theorise the existence of a pre-developed, 'totalised' *infans* psyche wherein meaning is experienced immediately and there is no experienced differentiation between 'inside' and 'outside'. Both theorise the occurrence of a 'break', onto-genetic in nature, whereby the totalised psyche is thrust into socio-symbolic

reality, splitting/rupturing it; and both view the self as a symptom of this break, with the development of the transcendental ego being a social-cathection to suture this break within 'complete' subjectivity. Both also argue that this break creates an 'internal' psychic drive for fulfilment, buffeting and affecting the ego – itself also affected 'externally' by the symbolic-imaginary of the social-historical order / the 'big Other' – and that it is from this which a capacity for creativity derives.

The key difference between Castoriadis and Žižek, as pertains to subjectivity therefore comes down to the difference between what is ultimately an essentially positive conception of the unconscious and an irreducibly negative one (on this, see: Adams, 2011, 90). Thus, while for Castoriadis at the *infans* stage the monadic psyche is a positive state separate from the social, this is not the case with Žižek's own conceptualisation of the 'subject-in-the-real'. The first holds to the existence of a pre-social matrix-of-meaning through which somatic and social stimuli are mediated, the latter does not. Furthermore, in Žižek's conceptualisation there is a radical distance between the pre-symbolic and post-symbolic state of subjectivity following the break. Rather than a positive 'memory' remaining from the pre-socialised state there is only the radical negativity of the void. For Castoriadis, meanwhile, there is a simultaneous – and contradictory – continuation *and* loss of pre-social meaning between these two subjective states.

Read alongside one another the similarities between the two approaches are thus as impressive as the fundamental differences. Indeed it seems a shame that, for two figures who share so much in common, their relation should be blighted by these apparent incommensurables. In light of this, as discussed above, what is here advocated is a deliberate misreading of Castoriadis through Žižek framed spectacles – one which

visualises the surgical excision of the notion of an essential pre-social monadic meaning (and its resultant, post-break continuation) and leaves only a Žižek-ian subject *qua* void of self-relating negativity. With the importance for both Castoriadis and Žižek of coherence and clear-cut positions, such an action *must* amount to more than a mere combination of parts. The question, then, is the extent to which this re-reading of Castoriadis as regards subjectivity undermines/alters the philosophy of radical autonomy he offers us also? Does re-reading Castoriadis through Žižek leave us, ultimately, with just Žižek? The argument set out below, is resolutely No.

Castoriadis's conception of the unconsciousness as 'magmatic' (Castoriadis, 2005, 283) is valuable here. 'A magma', as he defines it, constitutes 'that from which one can extract (or in which one can construct) an indefinite number of ensemblist [set-theoretical] organizations but which can never be reconstituted (ideally) by a (finite or infinite) ensemblist composition of these organizations' (*ibid*, 343). Being un-signifiable (i.e. unable to be reconstituted) and unstable, this notion of the psyche as magmatic conception might be directly compared to the un-closable and fluctuating, alienating, negative gap/lack/void constitutive of Lacanian subjectivity (and indeed all social-structures).

Thus, to pull an admittedly out of context quotation from Castoriadis, viewing the magmatic unconscious as this alienating but generative psychic entity allows theorists to embrace a view wherein, *pace* the monad as foundation of creativity: 'The chaos/abyss/bottomlessness is what is behind or under every concrete existence, and at the same time it is the creative force – what we would call the *vis formandi* in Latin – that causes that upsurge of forms, organized being.' (Castoriadis, 2007, 171) What is this but the equivalent of the Lacanian 'Real' as described above? Indeed, Castoriadis

talks of the ‘ultimately undecidable X “out there”’ (1997, 327) and the ‘*a-meaning* of the world [which] is always a threat for the meaning of society. Thus the ever-present risk that the social edifice of significations will totter.’ (1991, 152) As these quotations attest, Castoriadis appears to accept the schema of a gap between what Lacanians would call the Real and the Imaginary-Symbolic ‘externally’, he simply does not do so internally: therein, by contrast, is the monad as homogenous, fluctuating field of ‘representations *cum* affects *cum* intentions’ (Castoriadis, 1997, 327).

Here then, is this article’s key theoretical manoeuvre with regards to subjectivity: By fraternally choosing to misread Castoriadis’s notion of the magmatic unconscious as signifying the unsignifiable void as per the manner set-out in Žižek’s theory of the subject, it becomes possible to apply the former’s already existing conception of the outside inside also, overcoming the contradictions internal to his conception of subjectivity and in so doing providing a radically negative foundation for contingent positive creation (*cf.* Marchart, 2007).

#### **iv) Autonomy and ‘the Act’**

So, does the excision of the monad eradicate the possibility of a genuinely radical conceptualisation of autonomy? As described already, Castoriadis (2007, 89) conceptualised the autonomous person as ‘someone who gives herself her own laws’, this being possible via individual’s capacity to ‘look inward, wondering about its motives, its reasons for acting, its profound inclinations’. He thus placed creative power firmly within the hands of autonomous agents. How does this compare with Žižek’s conception of the transformatory subject?

The first point to grasp is that, in opposition to Castoriadis' conception of Lacan as an arch-structuralist, the latter never denied the possibility of a radical re-articulation of the predominant symbolic order. This ability to re-articulate does not, however, *contra* Castoriadis' view, spring from, nor is it guaranteed by, any 'primordial essence or source of representation' (Stavrakakis, 2007, 59). Rather, this re-articulation becomes possible within the gap created by the contingent dislocation of the existing socio-symbolic order.

It is from this point that Žižek adopts what has been labelled a 'Leninist-Lacanian' conception of the Act (*l'acte*) supported by an optimistic faith that presently perceived limits on the possible don't signal an unescapable enclosure (Žižek & Daly, 2004, 135). This is due to the fact that the internal order of the mediating imaginary-symbolic order within which actors operate cannot be closed/determined by a privileged centre; rather, it contains ineliminable loop-holes and points of potential dysfunctional breakdown (Johnston, 2007, 236). This is the case since, were the latter not the case, it would logically involve the inherently contradictory situation whereby a centre structured the structure whilst itself escaping the process of structuration (*cf.* Derrida, 1978, 279). This absence of an *a priori* or final (i.e. ultimate) foundation, means that complete totalisation and the closure of any/all systems or structures of social relations is ultimately impossible, there being within them a 'dissynchrony that is fundamental to our language, [and] our selves' (Widder, 2008, 10).

Within the contours of these 'un-fixable' social-historical constructions, the Žižek-ian Act designates those 'occurrences and gestures through which old orders are broken with via points of abrupt rupture, points interrupting the cohesion and continuity of whatever counts as the established run of things'; they are 'that which, from apparently

out of nowhere, suddenly and unexpectedly catalyzes processes of transformation within given sets of circumstances' (Johnston, 2009, xx, xxviii). The Act is autonomous in character in so far as it occurs following a 'break' in a previously sedimented imaginary-symbolic order and as such is not constrained by the pre-existing social structure; it 'is, as it were, an abyssal self-grounded autonomous act' (Žižek & Daly, 2004, 136).

The Act is thus truly radical in the sense that the term indicates 'an unbridgeable gap between two levels which cannot be mediated or dialecticized via the logic of either level' (Marchart, 2004, 58); the 'value' of an Act cannot be determined on the basis of what came before it, constituting 'an intervention that cannot be accounted for in terms of its pre-existing 'objective conditions'.' (Žižek, 2001a, 117) Rather, the 'true' Act, Žižek states (2009, 151-2), 'fills in the gap in our knowledge'. Importantly, Žižek refuses to specify any possible preconditions for the occurrence of the conditions of an Act, their being conceived instead as arising *ex nihilo*: 'We cannot actively decide to accomplish an act, the act surprises the agent itself' (Žižek, 2001b, 144).

Such *ex nihilo* creation involves radical transformation both for the symbolic order and for subjectivity itself whilst not implying any association with the remnants of a presupposed proto-meaning. But it also means accepting a concept of social change seemingly predicated upon surprise encounters and a radically indeterminable process of post-break societal re-sedimentation: The Act itself does not actively cause the dislocation; rather the 'political revolution', so understood, is a 'miracle' (Žižek, 2001c, 15). But such a view is as Johnston (2009, xxx) writes, both 'questionable and problematic', dismissing as it does 'gradual evolution' as involving no change at all (and certainly no *agency*), plumping instead, in its dismissal of 'ostensibly minor actions', for

a conception of political transformation based upon individuals 'awaiting the miraculous event of the major act' (*ibid*) – which they themselves will not know how they brought about (Žižek, 1998b, 14).

In a sense this is to conceptualise subjects as actors (or more accurately 'actors') who *do not act*, as the Žižek-ian Act thus all but forecloses discussion of *real* political action both before and *after* the Act: Like Castoriadis, the aim of Žižek, to quote Sharpe and Boucher (2010, 63), is 'overcoming heteronomy', but 'the way [he] understands the Cartesian subject [as void] frames what [he] can think is politically desirable, and informs his view concerning the possible ways these political ideals can be achieved' (*ibid*, 64). As Swedlow (2010, 172) asks, 'if an act is something that occurs to the subject, to what degree is it an act and not an effect?'- a question he answers by declaring Žižek's concept of the Act a case of 'confusion between formal description and prescription'. His is, as such, an exogenously derived, asymmetrically re-active conception of political transformation: radical change occurs with the unforeseeable encounter with the inexplicable (i.e. the Real) and thus lacks a pro-active, endogenous element. This is a conceptualisation which ironically brings with it the coterminous risk of discouraging in advance exactly the sort of efforts to transform the present world as Žižek seemingly desires (see: Sheehan, 2012, 85). It also seems as far away from the autonomous subject dreamt of by Castoriadis as it is possible to be.

Yet, the similarities between Castoriadis and Žižek do not end with regards to subjectivity as, in what might appear a further irony, Castoriadis himself raises a similar thesis regarding forms of radical change. As he declares, in words which might have been copy/pasted from Žižek himself:

if we want to move on to something different, for me, this is what strikes me as a problem (and here we are facing the abyss): basically, what does this require? It requires a new historical creation with new significations, new values, a new type of human being, all of which has, more or less, to be done at the same time, transcending, by definition, all possibility of foresight and of forward planning. (Castoriadis, 2011, 37)

There are clear harmonics between this notion – of new creation transcending all possibility of planning – and Žižek’s conception of the Act. In these manners, Alexandros Kioukiolos (2012, 141) notes, both Castoriadis ‘and more uncritically Žižek’ hold ‘onto the prospect of large-scale socially reconstruction, which might be fundamental but could not be total or final.’

Despite such moments of seeming synchronicity, however, the two conceptions of autonomy are not the same. Castoriadis’s conceptualisation of autonomous *activity* still provides a valuable theoretical counter-point to the ‘wait and see’ position fundamental to ‘the Act’ due to its emphasis on *action* as much as autonomy. While Žižek’s conception of the (im)possibility of autonomous agency leads him to argue that ‘[t]he only way to lay the foundations for a true, radical change is to withdraw from the compulsion to act, to ‘do nothing’...’ (Žižek, 2004, 72), Castoriadis declares that ‘Freedom is activity’:

Freedom is very difficult. [...] There’s a marvellous phrase from Thucydides: “it is necessary to choose: rest or be free.” I think it’s Pericles who says this to the Athenians: “if you want to be free, you have to work.” You cannot rest. (2011, 17)

This is a classic agonisitic view of political action. The key question then is whether, with the corrective theoretical surgery advocated above to excise the problematic concept of the monad as vessel of an originary matrix of meaning, the basis for this constructive concept of autonomy as activity is removed also? Rather than a cure, do we



end up with a lobotomised Castoriadis, leaving us nothing, in terms of political action, but the also problematic notion of the Act as ‘miraculous event’ as per Žižek (2000, 376)? Again, the answer is No.

*Alienation and Autonomy: Prerequisite, not Obstacle*

The key issue here is the psyche. For Castoriadis autonomy is predicated upon an ability to think ‘at a distance’ from the social-historical and this is made possible by the extra-social matrix of meaning which exists in the monadic psyche, continuing across from the pre-socialised monadic state of the *infans*. On the other hand, autonomy in the Žižek-ian sense is made possible for exactly the opposite reason: It is the *lack* of any such monadic psyche which keeps open the possibility of traversing present sedimented modes of thinking. This is because the psyche, as lack, acts as ‘a hitch’ – that is, as ‘an impediment which gives rise to ever-new symbolizations by means of which one endeavours to integrate and domesticate it ... but which simultaneously condemns these endeavours to ultimate failure’ (Žižek, 1994b, 22).

Indeed, to borrow a phrase from Deleuze and Guattari (1983, 8), the autonomous individual, it might be said, works (i.e. acts in a manner which can be deemed autonomous) ‘only when they break down, and by continually breaking down’. This is meant not in the Deleuzian sense – i.e. of a shattering, fragmenting or disintegrating subject – but instead as something akin to an irreparable perpetual-motion machine which, continual glitching and occasionally crashing, always subsequently re-boots with a modified programming: There is a ‘ghost’ in this machine, but this ghost is not the ‘mind’ as distinct from the ‘matter’ as understood in the normal Cartesian sense, but the catalytic tension created by the ineliminable ‘gap’ constitutive of subjectivity, be it

labelled 'magma' (following Castoriadis) or 'lack' (following Žižek). It is here that we find the space for a form of agential autonomy worthy of the name.

As Fabio Vighi (2010, 133) writes in his own re-working of Žižek's philosophy: 'Žižek's materialism is based on the groundbreaking insight that the gap constitutive of reality is nothing but the gap constitutive of subjectivity: we *are* the very impossibility that we ascribe to external reality, and that we must constantly disavow or displace if we are to connect with it.' It is for this reason that '[i]t is therefore crucial, politically, to conceive self-alienation not as a problem but as the key to the solution' (*ibid*, 101). In seeking answers regarding the possibility of autonomy, the focus must therefore be upon the occurrence of this 'short-circuiting' (Johnston, 2007, xxiii) *qua* displacement from external reality, how it comes about and the possibilities for pro-active, positive agency attached to it.

Since Žižek's position is that this short-circuiting occurs by surprise, without agential intension (2000, 376), the notion of seeking out encounters with such a resultant effect might seem too self-authorial and thus quasi-existentialist from his perspective. Yet arguably active critical reflexivity allows exactly such an act(ion), even with the excision of the positively-charged psychic monad. It is this ability which, as noted, for Castoriadis underlies subjects' capacity for autonomy – his 'project of autonomy' envisaging 'the maximization of the possibilities of reflection, self-reflection and deliberation' (Peter Osborne quoted in Castoriadis, 1996, 13). As Sharpe and Bouchner note, in his early works Žižek (1989-c.1995) arguably shared such a view: 'the political ideal that animates [this] work is the modern notion of autonomy: rational self-determination by self-legislating individuals, in opposition to our dependent, heteronomous subjection to the socio-political Other' (2010, 63). This, however, was in his 'radical democratic'

phase, before and the embracing of the 'Leninist-Lacanian' Act as the only true path to change.

In judging how this can be actualised we can return to Castoriadis, or at least one of his primary interpreters, David Ames Curtis and his delineation of the concept of improvisation. As Curtis (1988, xvii) describes, '[t]o "im-pro-vice" literally means *not* to "foresee," *not* to anticipate' (*ibid*, xvii). As a statement regarding action, this chimes in regards to the Act, as explained above. Discussing the concept *via* the metaphor of jazz improvisation, however, Curtis writes that:

In "improvisation" as I conceive it, one does not act in an "immediate," un-prepared way lacking all foresight ... The very process of "improvisation" ... involves planning, the making of choices (one of the most elementary being *when* to start "playing" and when to remain silent), and the creation of alternative forms of articulation (*what* to "play"); it also gives birth to that which was not contained in previous activities. (*ibid*, xix)

Castoriadis (2010, 188) speaks of the need for an individual seeking 'enlightenment' to first 'shake herself enough to be able to be enlightened', the latter not being a passive state, but one *sought*: 'You must want to be enlightened' as '[t]he reception of the Enlightenment is just as creative as its creation.'

Like a reader who selects a random article from *Subjectivity* on the judgement that its content may confront her with radical new ideas which are until the point of encounter unanticipated, individuals can elect to self-reflexively interrogate their own positions on different issues of their own determining in a manner whereby the end point reached is unknown. What do I believe? Why do I believe it? Upon what grounds have I made this judgement? All knowledge of the world being mediated through existing social-historical imaginary-symbolic institutions, themselves held 'open' by the limits of the

Real, all judgements regarding these questions are made based upon contingently founded foundations and as such can become 'unstuck' (see: Marchart, 2007). It is in looking at seemingly foundational statements awry that this lack of objective finality is evident.

In all of this, self-reflexivity is key; however, *pace* Castoriadis, in said reflecting there is no pre-historic matrix of meaning to buttress and mould new ideas from. Rather, it is the alienation fundamental to subjectivity, barring the closure of individual identity, that makes possible subjective short-circuiting and thus keeps open spaces 'at a distance' from pre-existing systems of social significations wherein new patterns of symbolisation can arise. Peeling away justifications one arrives at the empty space of a pure "because", thus dislocating the pre-existing imaginary-symbolic institution and opening up the space for another more 'readable' (re)articulation.

Castoriadis (2011, 38) himself compared this process to the autonomy of the poet, explaining that '[w]hen you write a poem, you use the words of the language, but what you are doing is not a combination of these words. It's a new form that you impose on them, through their linkage, through a sense [*esprit*] that pervades a poem.' This form of creation, he argues, 'is not a simple reprisal of elements that were in existence' as '[t]here is a new form [created] that is not limited to combination.' As Kioupkiolis (2012, 188) echoes: 'Original self-creation consists mainly in the sporadic emergence of new forms that cannot be fully reduced to antecedent conditions. But new figures make use of pre-existing materials and spring up within pre-established contexts.'

Such a conception of autonomous change viz. reflexive improvisation involves the re-articulation of pre-existing elements of the social-historical, such that a fundamentally new form of imaginary-symbolic representation is created *ex nihilo*. It thus offers a pro-

active conceptualisation of how radical agent-led change can occur which goes beyond, without rejecting, the Žižek-ian Act as (a) mode of autonomous revolution – but is not reliant upon Castoriadis’s problematic ontology of subjectivity based around concepts such as a monadic psyche containing a pre-social meaning which continues to exist post-socialisation. In an act of filtration, re-reading Castoriadis through Žižek as advocated here produces a new composite purer for being tainted.

## Conclusion

Castoriadis wanted to overcome alienation, believing it a mere social-historical condition and ultimate impediment to autonomy. In so doing he crafted a theory of the subject which contained within it a fatal contradiction. Ironically, what he had failed to recognise is that it is *precisely* alienation which makes possible autonomy in the first place: A heteronomous element *qua* a blockage internal to subjectivity is always necessary for autonomous creativity, barring as it does the closure of subjective identity and social identifications and thus providing the conditions for ‘short-circuiting’ via improvisation which makes autonomous action possible. In other words, it is only the existence of an internal subjective heterogeneous element that wards against the inevitability of social heteronomy.

In re-reading Castoriadis through Žižek as contentiously proposed here, the aim has been twofold: First, to show how the inherent contradictions of the former’s theory of the subject can be overcome by embracing the fundamental alienation central to the ontology of the latter; second, to demonstrate that in doing so, the pro-active conceptualisation of autonomous creativity *ex nihilo* which Castoriadis advocated remains in our grasp, not simply Žižek’s rather disempowering concept of the Act.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See also the special issue of *Subjectivity*, 10 (3) edited by Derek Hook and Calum Neill (2010).

<sup>2</sup> For Castoriadis, the term 'institution' – so important in his work – designates both 'the instituting process ... and the concrete institutions of a given society all at one'. It can, therefore, be seen as being double-jointed in its meaning (Arnold, quoted in Castoriadis, 2007, 272).

<sup>2</sup> To further clarify, the 'Big Other' is a modality of 'the Other', the symbolic which blocks the closure of 'the Subject' (hence, the Lacanese matheme of the barred S sign: \$ for the 'barred-subject'). This blockage is constitutive, as, paradoxically, the Subject persists only in as far as its full identity is blocked (by the Other) (Žižek 1990, 252-4).

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